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RELATIONAL DIALECTICS IN COLLEGE LDRs: MANAGING THE TENSIONS OF
LONG-DISTANCE DATING IN COLLEGE

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis
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Abstract

A significant population of college students have been, or are currently, in a long distance relationship (LDR). This study examined tensions experienced by college students in LDRs using Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) and Dark Side Theory. I used a thematic analysis to analyze responses from an open-ended survey distributed to and answered by 23 students in LDRs. I found that RDT was exemplified in the study by finding tensions of connection-autonomy and predictability-novelty, as well as tensions of balancing time and FOMO-living in the moment. The most common tension management strategies used were selection, separation, and reframing. Finally, I found that LDRs enhanced student's well-being through a sense of support, communication competence, relational growth, and personal growth, while they detracted from well-being by impeding on other relationships, impeding on school, and impeding on health. The results showed a valuable application of RDT and Dark Side Theory, especially when used to complement each other. I also found that selection as a tension management strategy may have had worse implications for some relationships. Further, I found that LDRs can have negative implications for social support networks. Future research should be done to continue to advance RDT and Dark Side together, look at unique experiences among seemingly monolithic populations, the impacts of LDRs on student success, and the impacts of LDRs on social support.

Key Words: long distance relationship, relational dialectics theory, dark side theory, well-being, college dating

Relational Dialectics in College LDRs: Managing the Tensions of Long-Distance College Dating

As the number of people receiving higher education has grown and institutions have expanded (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), so has the prevalence of long-distance relationships among young adults. College is thought of as a time to explore yourself and the world around you, specifically in and through relationships of different kinds. It is even safe to say that many see college as an opportunity to potentially meet their significant other. Research has shown that up to 75% of college students have been involved in a long distance romantic relationship (Wang, Roaché, & Pusateri, 2019). In fact, amongst college relationships, some research has found that 25-40% of college students are in a long distance relationship, or LDR (Belus et al., 2019), whereas others have found as many as one-third to three-fourths of college students have been, or are currently in, an LDR (Wang, Roaché, & Pusateri, 2019). This is a significant number of students that are impacted by these relationships, suggesting a need to better understand their experience.

Romantic relationships can be beneficial to the relational partners involved in them. However, as with most things, there are drawbacks to these relationships. Communication research seems to be ever rooted in the positive aspects of relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). Even when research is conducted about negative situations, such as depression, anger, and anxiety, researchers tend to approach these situations in a positive way (Duck, 1994). Thus, there has shown to be a positivity bias in communication research as well as in how communication is viewed. Spitzberg & Cupach (2011) identify the “dark side” of communication to include dysfunctional or destructive human behaviors, deviance, betrayal, awkward or rude aspects of behavior, direct and indirect implications of human exploitation, and many more (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). In fact, there can be negative outcomes associated with positive communication

while there also can be positive outcomes that derive from seemingly negative situations. Thus, it is important to address this positivity bias in communication, recognize it, and be mindful of it in our understanding of the experience of college students in LDRs. This study, then, is intentionally designed to explore both the positive and negative aspects of long distance relationships in the college experience. It is important to first understand the benefits of long distance relationships for college students. The literature suggests several key benefits for college students in long distance relationships, including higher use of positive communication strategies, higher levels of trust and commitment, and higher reported levels of relational satisfaction.

Benefits of Long Distance Relationships for College Students

Relationships in general should have positive outcomes associated with them, such as happiness, fulfillment, and companionship in which to share your life and livelihood. In fact, marital status has profound effects on a person's health and well-being (Du Bois, Yoder, Ramos, Grotowski, & Sher, 2019). Aside from benefits similar to those involved in any sort of healthy, romantic relationship, long distance relationships can bring about positive outcomes through their own unique aspects.

One study found that long distance relationships actually fueled healthy behaviors, as individuals in these relationships had better diets and exercise behaviors (Du Bois, Yoder, Ramos, & Sher, 2019). Other positive outcomes associated with LDRs are increased skills of independence and patience (Waterman et al., 2017). Firmin et al. reported high levels of trust and commitment to one's partner for those involved in LDRs (2014). The females involved in their study relayed answers that showed themes of high-quality communication, the self-perception

that they work harder at communication than those in GCRs, and more positive social communication skills (Firmin et al., 2014).

It is also important to note that people in LDRs are not at a disadvantage in their relational satisfaction, either (Firmin et al., 2014). There are actually several outcomes that are more positive than people in GCRs. Contrary to the researchers' hypotheses in one study, individuals in LDRs do not report lower levels in relationship quality or sexual quality, and even scored equal or higher in other factors such as intimacy or positive communication (Dargie, Blair, Goldfinger, & Pukall, 2015). Additionally, few differences exist between LDRs and GCRs for almost any factor that they studied, whether it be relational satisfaction overall or intimacy, which can then contribute to feelings of a better social life. Though certainly beneficial in many ways, long distance relationships can also be problematic for college students, such as heightened stress levels, feelings of loneliness, and financial hardships.

Consequences of Long Distance Relationships for College Students

When the barriers to your relationship are heightened—which often occurs when being part of an LDR—psychological, emotional, and even physical distress can also be heightened (Cionea, Wilson Mumpower, & Bassick, 2019). With psychological and emotional distress being high, these things can tend to manifest themselves in a relationship. Uncertainty in the relationship and jealousy were deemed to be prevalent factors among college LDRs, according to a study done by Suwinyattichaiporn et al. (2017).

Important research has been conducted in the field of health in association with LDRs. In a study conducted by Du Bois, Yoder, Ramos, & Sher (2019), the researchers analyzed individual's health and health behavior in accordance with their LDR, specifically when the status of the relationship was marital. Overall, they found that women's health is more closely

related with marital satisfaction than men, however, men tend to have more substance abuse and use more pain interference tactics than women when they are unsatisfied with their relationship. Another important discovery that was made during this study that being in an LDR predicted higher stress levels (Du Bois, Yoder, Ramos, & Sher, 2019). This means that being in an LDR can have some negative psychological implications. Additionally, Guldner (1996) found that those in LDRs reported higher levels of depressive symptoms than those in GCRs.

As for psychological distress, a study done by Maguire & Kinney (2010) sought to understand why LDR situations are typically distressing specifically for female college students. Although those surveyed reported varying levels of satisfaction and distress stemming from their relationships, the researchers found that there were a few particular sources of difficulty. The sources found were separation, travelling and planning communication, economic hardships (due to travelling, phone bills, etc.), and the varying cultural beliefs that relationships require high levels of face-to-face contact as well as close proximity to be “real” (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Women tend to feel these stressors more psychologically than men do. In these cases, however, LDRs are able to be predicted and thrive due to perceived levels of helpfulness, openness between the participants, joint problem solving, and levels of cooperation between the two partners (Maguire & Kinney, 2010).

Importance of Social Support Networks for College Students

Social support networks have shown to have large effects on students and their well-being. Berkman (1984) conducted a study that shows the strong, important linkage between social support networks and physical health throughout different dimensions. Social support networks are also negatively correlated with student burnout (Kim et al., 2018) and conversely have a positive effect on a student’s success and well-being outcomes.

When social support networks aren't so strong, sometimes loneliness can (and will) prevail. Loneliness can play a significant role in our psychological and emotional distress levels. As mentioned previously, there are several times when college students feel heightened loneliness in their romantic relationships (Firmin, Firmin, & Lorenzen, 2014). As implicated by the previous literature, the dynamic of long distance relationships can sometimes factor into the loneliness of a college student or increase support, or maybe even both at the same time.

Clearly, college students in long distance relationships simultaneously experience benefits and challenges unique to their relational experience. This suggests the potential for a unique set of tensions in these students' social lives that they must productively manage. In light of this and in recognition of the importance in understanding both the positive and negative impacts of these relationships on college students, this study is grounded in relational dialectics theory.

Relational Dialectics Theory

There are often competing tensions that are navigated within a relationship. According to Guerrero et al. (2014), social meaning-making takes place within communication, which means that in turn, communication gives meaning to relationships. Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) is an interpretive lens in which communication is viewed as a dialogic process of meaning-making that comes about through a struggle of often-competing discourses (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Given that everyone has their own wants and desires for their individual self and their relationships, RDT highlights the ongoing "discursive struggle" for our competing needs and desires internally within ourselves and externally through our relationships (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). The foremost of these discursive struggles are those of integration, certainty, and expression, which can be manifested on the individual and relational level. Scales of

connection-autonomy, novelty-predictability, and openness-closedness are typically used for internal discursive struggles, while public-private, stability-change, and conventionality-uniqueness are used at the relational level (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008).

With RDT, it is important to understand that there is a constant negotiation of these struggles, and there are several ways that they can be dealt with. For example, you can compartmentalize your relationship to have complete openness about past relationships, but never to discuss finances. Further, while relationships are ever-changing, so are the boundaries and negotiations between goals.

Relational Dialectics can inform our understanding of how college students experience their LDRs by highlighting the tensions that couples in LDRs constantly manage, particularly given the inherent tension of managing a relationship with a geographically distant partner. For example, it may help us to answer questions about how they deal with connection versus autonomy through navigating the difficulty of being physically apart. I imagine that these negotiations will look different for those in LDRs versus those in GCRs.

Thus, given this information and lack of research in the field, I propose the following research questions:

RQ 1: What tensions do college students experience in long distance relationships?

RQ 2: How do college students manage these tensions?

RQ 3: How do college students perceive their LDR shapes their sense of well-being?

Methods

Participants

College-age students, average age being 17-24 years old, were the sample frame for this study. I included students involved in LDRs where couples were not able to see each other on a day-to-day basis. This was to include those participants that may not have extreme geographical

distance to navigate, but they otherwise feel as if they are in an LDR and have the same experience because they are not able to see each other daily. Only participants in dating (i.e. not married) relationships will be included. In addition, the relationship must be ongoing or terminated within the last six months, while the duration of the relationship must be longer than 6 months. Only one member of the relationship must be involved in the study. Recognizing that all kinds of relationships as important, only heterosexual relationships were included in order to keep the results uniform and in case there were dynamics we may not be able to account for. First, participants were solicited through online social media accounts, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Second, students were recruited through college classes and offered extra credit for participation. Additionally, in hopes that some of the participants are in association with others in the same situation, participants were given the opportunity to recruit others that are also involved in LDRs, a technique known as “snowball sampling” (Goodman, 1961).

Procedures

Participants completed the survey online through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Communication Studies website. Prior to filling out the full measures, they were required to give consent and provide demographic information (i.e. gender, race/ethnicity, age, etc.) as well information about their relationship (i.e. length of relationship, how often they are in contact physically or through various media, distance apart, etc.) in order to ensure they met study criteria. Students were offered extra credit for participation in the survey. Research questions included in the survey were open-ended questions with space for free responses. This method was chosen because the free responses allow for personal elaboration and possible revelation of

factors I may not know, account for, or understand, so the parameters are able to be stretched. Further, the current global pandemic has made in-person interviews difficult.

Data Analysis

The data was exported from Qualtrics survey into an Excel spreadsheet. Each question was listed and crossed with participant responses. The survey had 25 respondents, but only 23 respondents met the qualifications listed for this study; both excluded participants had not been in an LDR for 6 months or longer. The following table provides the demographic information. Please note that, to ensure anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms to make it simpler to understand and distinguish. The Description of Participants is provided in [Table 1](#).

The data was then analyzed first by the lead researcher and also independently by two faculty co-advisors. We individually read through the responses and took notes of our thoughts and common patterns and recurrences we read throughout the participants' responses. We then held a data conference to compare notes and synthesize our findings. Through discussion, we refined our individual analyses and agreed on themes that represented the experiences of the participants.

We chose to use a thematic analysis to code the responses given by our respondents. Braun & Clarke describe a thematic framework for analyzing qualitative data in studies such as ours. This framework is used as a method for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (theme) within data," (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When identifying a theme, the article mentions that we must capture something important and common among the data in relation to the questions we ask. These are not limited by number of occurrences or some other factor, but rather what is prevalent among the answers (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Another framework we used to guide our analysis was Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory involves empirical induction from the data itself by the coder (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher is expected to set aside preconceived notions, other theories, and making deductions and inferences to allow themselves to absorb the data at what it really shows (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To the theorists, it is most important to let the data speak for itself and not let the researcher provide their own perspective until after the coding is done and the results are written.

Owen (1984) provides guidelines for observing data and thus creating themes for analysis. He first states that a naturalistic study relies on “unimposed lay conceptions of actual communication episodes,” (Owen, 1984, p. 274). This means that the data will speak for itself and not rely on the perceptions of the researcher, but rather what was actually communicated, taken for what was said. In relational discourse, Owen states that themes are to be noted when three criteria were met: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (1984). Recurrence is when at least two participants communicated a certain meaning (even if in different phrasing); this is different from repetition in that repetition involves the repeated use of the same wording (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Finally, forcefulness involves strong communication about a particular aspect. For example, if a word is completely capitalized, bolded, underlined, or if overall a response is articulated very well.

For instance, to analyze RQ1, each of us individually sat down with the responses from the survey. Keeping our thematic analysis strategy in mind, we each took notes of responses, being sure to note when phrases or ideas were mentioned more than once, as well as taking note of responses that were very thoughtfully articulated. For example, I noted that for question 18, response #24 stated that “[My LDR] definitely added an extra motivator to my life. If I told her about an assignment I was procrastinating on or didn’t want to finish, she would encourage me to

complete it.” As I will discuss later on, ‘motivation’ was a factor that respondents claimed to help shape their well-being. Multiple other responses mentioned the term ‘motivation,’ and I thought that respondent articulated it well, so I chose to use his quote. We individually followed similar patterns of coding (perhaps with a bit of variance) for each question before we came together to discuss what we found.

Relational Dialectics Theory was used to guide our coding as well. Each of the researchers were familiar with this theory and kept this in mind while coding the responses. RQ1, which is concerned with the tensions that college students experience in long distance relationships, was crafted based on RDT. This question was answered by several questions included in our survey, such as “In what ways has your long distance relationship supported your experience as a college student? Please provide an example,” and the same question again negatively (substitute ‘supported’ for ‘inhibited’). This provided opportunity for the respondents to articulate some of the tensions that they felt, even if they themselves may not know. As the researchers, we then used the frames of the common tensions of RDT and compared them with the responses. We let the responses speak for themselves, however, we found that a lot of the responses fit under the common tensions expressed by RDT, such as connection-autonomy.

To find a theme, we followed much of the criteria mentioned previously. After doing our individual coding, we pondered the connections that could be made between the responses, and whether they fell within the same category as another or were something different entirely. We then held a data conference to discuss our ideas and findings with one another.

During the meeting, we worked through each research question together and discussed what each one of us found individually. We compared notes and ideas to find out whether any of us reached the same conclusions after reading through the data or had different ideas about

categorization. There were no real discrepancies between us during the initial analysis. All three of us brought our own ideas, and many of them were able to complement or combine with the other ideas brought. Singular themes may have only been articulated by one coder, but we were all able to agree and refine these themes together. The data conference was to ensure the validity of our findings.

Results

Research Question 1: What tensions do college students experience in long distance relationships?

First, I will address Research Question 1. These findings address which tensions college students experience in an LDR. Specifically, the themes that emerged from the data were 1) connection-autonomy, 2) predictability-novelty, 3) balancing time, and 4) fear of missing out (FOMO) vs. living in the moment. I will begin with the emergent tensions that most align with the theoretical framework, then move into the more nuanced tensions that emerged in the data.

Connection-Autonomy

The tension of connection-autonomy is outlined in RDT as one of the central tensions experienced. This tension is the desire to feel close to one's partner at the same time as wanting to have an individual identity or make decisions on your own. This tension was present in my study based on the responses from several different questions posed to the respondents, whether for that purpose or not.

Autonomy was articulated often as "independence." Not being able to rely on their significant other in a lot of aspects—especially those that are enabled by the physical presence of their partner—helps a lot of the respondents to feel a sense of independence and that their experience is their own. For example, Kyle said (in reference to his LDR), "I think it has helped

me be more independent.” Later on, he said that his LDR “creates more independence and time to grow between each other to promote a stable relationship together in the future.” It seemed that this feeling was felt very strongly by that respondent. John shared that his LDR allowed him to focus on himself and his schoolwork. Similarly, Jessica said, “Not being able to see him every day has helped me to be able to focus on school more.” There were several more similar responses to various questions, reflecting the prevalence of this experience for these participants.

On the other hand, not surprisingly, these students had the desire to feel close to their partners. Something that was mentioned quite frequently was missing one’s partner or being sad that they could not be together. Respondents expressed the desire to communicate with their partner, be it over video chat, phone call, texting, or something else. As Haley said, the days that she did not receive a call or text made her feel distracted from her other responsibilities, which draws on the desire to feel closer to her partner through communication. Lots of respondents mentioned long (sometimes late-night) phone calls to “catch up” or “check in” with their partner by spending time together virtually.

Predictability-Novelty

Next, predictability-novelty, also a prominent tension in RDT, emerged in the data. This tension is concerned with aspects of a relationship that are comfortable and routine compared to the new and exciting (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2014). Though less prominent in this data, it emerged as a significant theme.

The words that were often used to show the predictability side of the tension were “comfort,” “stability,” and “security.” Further, many students said that they always had someone else to talk to because of their relationship, which could be helpful in giving an outside opinion.

Claire said her LDR gave her “a piece of home [she] can always relate to.” The comforting aspect of home and relating to a person you are connected with exemplifies predictability.

As for novelty, Madison said, “I get excited to show him things that we do on campus when he comes to visit.” She demonstrated that showing one’s partner the life they have on their own can be a new and exciting experience to share. Novelty does not have to have a positive spin, though. Amy explained that she would be less likely to spend time on school if her partner lived closer. She said that before they moved away from each other, they would hang out for hours at a time, but without him there with her, they call each other at night and text throughout the day. This demonstrates adapting to a new situation that was not predictable at one point in time.

Balancing Time

Another, more specific tension present in the data was balancing time between many facets in life, including school, work, friends, self, and of course, with their relational partner. It is difficult as a college student to find a good balance for all of the different aspects of life that one needs to devote time to. When in an LDR, you must devote a significant amount of time to communication in order to stay connected, which can foster this tension even more. Multiple students articulated finding it difficult to balance their time between communicating with their relational partner and also having time for friends, homework, work, and self-care. Answers varied in tone—some obviously positive, some obviously negative, and some neutral.

Relationship-self. First, there is a tension for finding balance between time for a relationship and time for oneself. One respondent, Rachel answered that the long distance relationship supported her experience as a college student. “It allowed me to take time for myself. I could do whatever I wanted with my schedule; I had more free time.” However, Jessica

answered that she often forgot what self-care was during her relationship and was only concerned with her partner. At least five respondents answered that their LDR inhibited their experience as a college student by contributing to levels of worry, stress, and one respondent even answered that it was “emotionally taxing.”

Relationship-social life. Next, there was explicit mention of balancing time for one’s LDR with their social life at school with friends. The unique dynamic of a long distance relationship often prevents those involved from merging their social lives with their relationship, as one often does when a part of a GCR. Madison communicated one aspect of this, saying, “On weekends where I go to see him, I sometimes feel like I am missing out on things that are happening [at school].” Claire had a similar response, saying that she feels like she is “missing out” when she goes to visit her partner. Another separate experience for Thomas is that “It sometimes removes me from conversations with friends when I have a facetime or call scheduled with her.”

Relationship-school. Another prevailing sector of balancing time was the balance between school and the relationship. It was actually a tension that was one of the most frequently mentioned throughout the survey. Amy describes the tension between finding time to do homework, classes, and “work phone calls in around [them]” in response to how being in an LDR shapes her experience as a college student. Nathan said that one way his LDR inhibited his experience as a college student is that it would stress him out and affect his mood in a negative way, making it harder to complete schoolwork.

Multiple at once. Finally, many of these students experienced multiple time-related tensions at once. For example, Haley says, “It was particularly difficult to logically divide time between him and school and work.” This exemplifies a tension being felt that a person feels that

not only is a struggle between two competing needs for time, but another one added on to that. Similarly, Haley said that there were times that she did not receive a call or text in a day, and it would “distract [her] from all other responsibilities.” This term she used vaguely, but it seemed to indicate multiple competing needs for time that she felt were at odds.

FOMO vs. Living in the Moment

Finally, as briefly touched on in earlier responses, another tension that is largely felt among the respondents is FOMO (fear of missing out) versus living “in the moment.” FOMO is a trend that has become prevalent in the age of social media (Milyavskaya, Saffron, & Hope, 2018), a regular medium through which these participants connected with their relational partners. Social media enables and mitigates these relationships in today’s culture, and can also enhance the mental processes involved with FOMO. This phenomenon was described by participants in regard to both their significant other and with their social lives at school (i.e. when they are one place, they have the desire to be in the other).

Living in the moment brings the more positive side of this tension. Theresa said this explicitly: “I try and live in every moment with or without him.” Others, like Jack, said that their relationship has helped them want to enjoy their college experience more. Responses like these show that living in the moment can be one side of a tension experienced by students in LDRs, while FOMO represents the other side of this tension.

A respondent that articulated this well was Madison. She said, “I still get to go do fun things, but when I am out, I get kind of sad that I cannot experience these things with him.” Our respondents themselves described the tension of FOMO vs. living in the moment. Additionally, several participants communicated throughout the survey that it was tough to be doing fun things

because missing their partner would cause them sadness, thus preventing them from “living in the moment.”

Research Question 2: How do college students manage these tensions?

When finding tensions that are inherent and exemplified in LDRs through these responses, I also measured the ways in which college students managed these tensions. What I found is three main ways, which are 1) selection, 2) segmentation/separation, and 3) reframing. Each management style is demonstrated through several different types of responses that all draw back to the same overarching theme.

Selection

Selection involves choosing one side of the dialectic over the other (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2014). This is a way of managing tensions by always favoring one over the other, such as *always* having open communication rather than keeping thoughts to yourself. I found this management style through a number of participants and depending on the topic.

In this study, one demonstration of this was balancing time by choosing one aspect over all others. For example, one student said, “School comes first and [his relationship] can’t get in the way of grades.” Alex also said, “I would make sure I was getting my schoolwork done at home with online classes and made that a priority over my relationship.” On the flip side, some students said that their partner often came first. Chloe said she prioritizes her boyfriend over friends. Amy said that she did not hang out with friends often because she would work around when her partner was available. Jessica said that she would put off assignments and “drop everything at the chance” to see him. These students that offered examples demonstrated selection with their time by choosing one priority first, always. It is worth noting that neither choice is either good nor bad, as both choices can have positive and negative aspects.

Another selection involved choosing to live in the moment rather than letting oneself experience FOMO. As Theresa said, “I try to live in every moment with or without him.” Theresa is choosing the side of living in the moment rather than letting herself imagine what life could be like if something were different. Here, there are not any articulated examples of choosing FOMO, however, this makes sense. It would not be likely that someone would consciously choose to experience this, but it has been good for people to choose to live in the moment if they realize they are (or are not) doing so.

Additionally, a few participants mentioned that because of jealousy or other various reasons, they choose not to socialize in a typical college setting. Lauren expressed that she does not go to frat parties or anything of the like. This form of selection for her was chosen because of what her partner wants, and she also does not want to make him jealous. For a different reason, Theresa does not socialize much without her partner. She says that her boyfriend is a large part of her social life; they share the same friends and take part in socializing together, so when he is not around, she does not socialize as much. These two examples have different reasoning for selection; however, they manifest in the same way.

A more extreme form of selection is terminating the relationship. At least ten (10), or 43%, of the respondents indicated that they are no longer in a long distance relationship. Many of them communicated that this was due to the tensions that they were dealing with due to separation.

Finally, a selection strategy that was thoroughly demonstrated was being in a state of constant communication. Many participants expressed the importance of texting their partner throughout the day. This is a newer phenomenon that came about with the rise of technology and prevalence of social media. This theme was first identified through a strong response from Haley. When asked how her LDR negatively influences her well-being, she said, “It gave me a

loss of perspective, I often forgot that there was a world outside of my phone if I wasn't with him.” Constant communication with her partner through her cell phone obviously had a profound impact on her life. Many others mentioned this constant communication while out with friends or doing homework, which caused those life areas to overlap. One student even mentioned coordinating school schedules with her partner “to find time to study while still talking to each other.” A final example of this is a response from Theresa:

“I call whenever I can. It may seem like I call a lot, but it's good to make the most of small conversations. When I'm at work and I'm doing mindless activities at my desk or eating a meal, I set up my phone with a FaceTime so I can work with him there or eat with him.”

These examples were enough to show a thorough justification of selection in different aspects. A next example, separation, will walk us through choosing different aspects of the dialectics at different times.

Separation

Separation is a form of managing tensions that involves choosing one side of the dialectic at different points in time. This can also be a topical segmentation, which emphasizes different sides depending on the topic at hand (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2014). This could mean choosing to experience both sides of a tension, but often choosing one at certain times depending on the situation. The respondents articulated examples of separation in a few different ways, including scheduling time for school, friends and work; prioritizing responsibilities each day and giving attention to those accordingly; compartmentalizing by keeping tasks separate from others; and making the most of time together.

To touch on the important tension of distributing time, separation was almost the most common management strategy. In this case, it was allocating time to one subject or area of life at a time. For example, Amy said, “I can focus more on my work because if he was here, I would be less likely to spend as much time on school.” Instead, she says they call each other at night to talk rather than try to manage homework and talking at the same time. Amy and her partner demonstrate a topical segmentation, as do many other couples that responded to my survey. Overwhelmingly, participants responded that their LDR allowed them to focus on school at a separate time than spending time with their partner. Even more so, students would continually note the importance of having time for more than one aspect of life at a time. Theresa articulated this well, saying:

I take time to "hang out" with my partner by having long Facetimes or watching a show together remotely, while still reminding myself it's okay to go do social things without him here. I also prioritize my day in terms of my responsibilities and spending time with him.

Here, she showed that she was able to have quality time with her partner and otherwise with her social life.

Showing that there is time for an LDR and school and many other priorities among respondents was very clearly communicated, although difficult. More specifically, many students communicated scheduling time or planning ahead times communication, school, social life, and more. Brandon said that he set a schedule for his day and blocked out time to video chat with his partner. Lauren said that she would do her homework in the morning and call her boyfriend in the afternoon. “It was almost scheduled,” she said. Similarly, Thomas said that he and his partner would talk each week about the days and times that worked for them to Facetime since they were

both busy students. A few students also mentioned making “rules” or at least communicating to their partner that they would not be as present on a certain day because they were busy with studying for an upcoming test, hanging out with friends, and more.

An interesting response by Amy about the way she has managed these situations says, “I have done my best just to keep them apart. They are both very important to me and it was my goal to make sure that I am able to tend to both an appropriate amount.” After reading that, it is worth noting that separation goes hand in hand with living in the moment; this is an example of overlap in this study. Many participants expressed that they would make sure the task at hand would have their complete attention, be it homework, a phone call with their partner, or spending time with friends. In another example, Lauren said, “I tried to focus on college, then focus on him. I couldn’t think about the two things at the same time because then one of the two would be neglected.” Additionally, Theresa said, “I make a conscious decision to call or video call, make eye contact and really listen to what my partner has to say so I can make the most out of short conversations and feel like we’ve spent time together.” These two responses exemplify the expressions from respondents on spending time intentionally and with focus, which enables them to get a quality experience out of each aspect of their lives.

Reframing

Reframing is another tension management strategy that “involves talking about tensions so that they seem complementary rather than contradictory” (Guerrero et al., 2014). Reframing can be exemplified by our previously mentioned tension, FOMO versus living in the moment. Living in the moment can be one way of reframing because an individual is experiencing the same situation, but rather than being sad about that, they choose to focus on what is directly in front of them at the moment. Additionally, many respondents mentioned making the most of

their Facetime conversations or phone calls, as that is the only way they are able to communicate throughout the week. Valuing the time spent in short or mundane conversations can be another example of reframing.

Reframing also emerged through responses about using upcoming time together as a sort of motivation. Thomas said, “I assure myself that it is worth it and when we are both back on break, things will be better.” This is another example of the reframing mindset. Thomas is not actively changing anything about his situation except for his outlook. It was often shown that partners would experience what was happening in the moment while looking forward to the next time they would be together. Madison also articulated this well:

I usually just tell myself that the following weekend I will be able to be with my friends as well as my boyfriend (because we take turns going from my place to his place on the weekends) and I also tell myself I get to see my friends on the weekdays so the weekends with him are important to me and important to him.

Reframing can also be “having it all.” Students discuss attempting to balance these things an equal amount of time or combining two things at once. Some students communicated that they make sure to spend time with friends when they can be together in order to incorporate their school friends into their relationship. Another example of this is from Madison, who gives a specific example of a time where she balanced her LDR with her college experience:

“It was a weekend where my sorority had a formal but it was also my boyfriend’s first baseball game of the season (He plays college baseball so spring semester he is traveling for baseball a lot) I obviously wanted to support him in his game but I also did not want to miss my formal so I drove to watch his game with my hair and makeup done and my dress in the car, and after the game, I stopped at a gas station to fix myself up and

change into my dress then I drove to my sorority formal a bit late. So I still got to experience both.”

Finally, a last emergence of reframing was to let go of control. Brandon said that being in a long distance relationship has taught him to “go with the flow as nothing is in [his] control.” This is an apparent change of mindset that allowed Brandon to cope with the hardships involved in his LDR. This was not explicitly mentioned by other participants, but I thought it important enough to mention for future directions.

Research Question 3: How do college students perceive their LDR shapes their sense of well-being?

For my third and final research question, I asked more specific questions in the survey having to do with well-being and how that affects the participants’ lives and relationships. To start with this concept, I first asked participants “what does well-being mean to you?” Answers varied with each student, but commonly mentioned terms are being healthy mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually; happiness; balance; comfort; pleasure; “whole self”; satisfaction/contentment; and positivity. I did this to get a baseline and overall sense of which factors the students were talking about when talking about well-being. It seemed that generally, many of the students had the same ideas when defining well-being in their own terms. When discussing this from here on, I will be referring to well-being in terms of what was mentioned by the students consistent with our coding patterns.

Enhancing Well-Being

Sense of support. A first way that college students perceive their LDR as enhancing well-being is that it provides a sense of support. Social support was found to be one of the main predictors of student burnout. If social support was strong, students tended to not get burnt out,

whereas students with lesser perceptions of social support were more likely to feel the effects of burnout in terms of schoolwork (Kim et al., 2017).

Many students mentioned at one point or another in the survey that their LDR helped them to feel like they were supported and that they “always had someone to talk to.” Matt articulated another interesting point that may be somewhat unique to an LDR:

“When things were good, there was a lot of support and it was easier to see the effort in supporting me in college because she had to be vocal about it.” Not only do these students in LDRs *feel* a sense of support, but they actually have to communicate that at times as well.

Being able to rely on one’s partner seemed to be a prevalent positive impact of an LDR on well-being. Along with that comes comfort. In one quote, John says that “she is always there to give advice and comfort me when things go wrong. It helps my positivity.” Claire said her LDR “gives [her] a piece of home [she] can always relate to.”

Another category that is included within a sense of support is that students’ LDRs keep them grounded and helped to mitigate stress. Participants often relied on their partner to help enhance their mental and emotional well-being. For example, Amy says, “...when I’m stressed I just call him and he’s able to convince me that whatever is stressing me out will end up fine.” Many more said that their partner mitigated their stress levels by being there for advice and encouragement. A few also mentioned that having someone “outside” of their campus life helped bring their stress levels down and keep them grounded in a variety of ways.

Other factors within a sense of support are motivation and encouragement. More than a few students mentioned that their LDR motivated them. Some said that their relationship would motivate them to complete assignments. Lauren said that sometimes her LDR makes her want to work harder because the sooner as she got her classes done, the sooner she could call her partner.

Claire said her well-being is positively influenced because her partner motivates her in everyday life. As mentioned earlier, Madison thinks of her and her partner's future together to motivate her to study hard so that they can have "as good of a future as possible." Along with that, a few students said that their partner would provide them with encouragement to study, finish homework, get involved on campus, and more. Thus, it is clear that a sense of support through LDRs enhances these students' well-being.

Communication competence. Next, I found that LDRs enhanced well-being by improving these students' communication competence. Communication competence in this case refers to the skills developed in regard to positive and effective communication. Communication is at the center of all relationships, and LDRs are no exception. Tying into the principle of "living in the moment," students mentioned the importance in their relationships of enacting conscious communication by displaying a sense of presence. One student mentioned "making the effort" to talk things out with their partner. William gives insight to this point. He said he makes a conscious effort to call his partner, "make eye contact and really listen to what my partner has to say." He says this is important in order to feel like they have spent time together. William and his partner bring a sense of presence into even their simplest of conversations to show each other that their communication, and thus their relationship, is valued. Communication competence also includes the demonstration of quality over quantity of communication. Alexis said that her and her partner practice "communicating openly and clearly" with each other in order to avoid conflict. As discussed previously in the section about managing tensions, some students had to make rules about communicating at only certain times of day or even not at all the night before a test. That shows that the participants were not necessarily concerned with the quantity of

communication (e.g. number of texts, time on the phone) but rather the quality of the communication when it did happen.

Relational growth. Another way that I found LDRs to enhance students' well-being is that it gave students the opportunity for relational growth. Ten or more students indicated that they were no longer in their LDR at the time of the survey. With that came some negative feelings, however, a few students communicated that this actually helped them to know what they wanted out of a relationship. Some students said that it showed them that they surely did not want to date long-distance again, but others also said that it showed them "what a healthy relationship looked like." Respondents articulated many positive and negative examples of what they wanted out of a relationship and communicated why the negative things helped them to understand what they wanted in the future. On the other hand, Theresa said that "being in an LDR with your best friend is better than not being with them at all." Whether it be for future relationships by knowing what they do and do not hold important in a relationship or developing their current one, it was exemplified that LDRs can enhance a student's well-being by developing their relationships overall.

Personal growth. A final emergence from the data that showed to enhance well-being is that LDRs give opportunity for personal growth. I found this in two main ways: organization and scheduling, and capacity for growth and independence. Consistent with one of the tensions we identified, numerous students mentioned that one way their LDR has benefitted them is to help with scheduling and organization. For example, Haley said that she "learned to create schedules and stick to her plans without relying on someone else." Others mentioned scheduling time away from their phone so that they could get ahead on homework and thus have more time for communicating with their partner over the weekend or at night. Alex said that his LDR made

him a “much more responsible” college student. These examples and more showed a clear enhancement of well-being by being organized and scheduling their time around priorities.

Personal growth was also shown by giving students greater independence and room to grow in oneself. Kyle articulated this well when he was asked how being in an LDR shapes his experience as a college student: “I think it creates more independence and time to grow between each other to promote a stable relationship together in the future.” Adding to that, Rachel said it allowed her to focus more on herself and her schoolwork.

The data emerging from enhancing well-being was prominent amongst the participants. Through a sense of support, communication competence, relational growth, and personal growth, we can see that LDRs have a vast opportunity for impacting well-being in a positive way. However, given that the Dark Side leads us to examine all impacts of communication in relationships, we know that there may be negative impacts as well. Next, I will examine students’ perceptions of their LDRs detracting from well-being.

Detracting from Well-Being

Just as any relationship can add positivity to one’s life and increase levels of well-being, so too can it add negativity and detract from well-being. This holds true with college LDRs, too, according to this data. Given that many of the respondents had terminated their relationship at the time of the survey, there were numerous mentions of inherently negative aspects of LDRs. Overall, I found LDRs to detract from well-being in three ways: 1) impeding on other relationships, 2) impeding on school, and 3) impeding on health. The discussions that follow will provide examples of each of these instances.

Impeding on other relationships. First off, impeding on other relationships was found twofold: completely refraining from social activities due to their relationships, as well as not

making new friends or sticking to their close social circle. Having a significant relationship in your life that is not able to be incorporated into regular social circles can be tough. Respondents have a difficult time with wanting to feel connected to social circles at school (where they are a majority of the time) while also wanting to be connected to their partner, who may live hours away. I found that participants often felt the need to “be connected” with their partner through texting or social media. As mentioned in an earlier section, Chloe felt that even when she was spending time with friends, she had to be texting her partner the whole time, which took away from that social time. Many others mentioned constant communication, as discussed under RQ2. Inevitably, being in a state of constant communication with a relational partner over the phone will detract from other relationships in some form or another.

While many participants indicated that their LDR was somewhat detrimental to their social relationships, some even mentioned barely having a social life at all, or choosing to not participate in social activities because of their relationships. There were even examples of participants that felt that they could not make new friends for a number of reasons. In one instance, Connor said, “I was reluctant to get out there and make friends while being in a relationship. I always just stuck to my close circle.” Amy said that she did not go out with friends as much as she once did, and John said that he felt the need to “be there” for his partner when he should be doing other things. A few other students responded that they did not go to parties or other social events because their partner wouldn’t like it, or they wanted to talk to their partner at night.

Impeding on school. Another finding was that many students demonstrated their LDR impeding on school. Consistent with earlier points made in this paper, the tension of time between school and their relationship was a constant negotiation. As follows, the responses

overwhelmingly showed that their LDR detracted from their well-being by detracting from school. For example, Nathan said that if he was feeling bad about his relationship, it became harder to complete schoolwork. Similarly, Jessica said that wanting to see her partner more often meant that she would put off assignments and drop everything if she had the chance to see him. Without further elaboration, students exemplified their well-being impeded on by school and their long distance relationship.

Impeding on health. Finally, through examining the data, I found that LDRs may have the potential to impede on personal health. This was communicated through feelings of exhaustion, negative impacts on mood, adding to stress levels, and increased feelings of loneliness. These findings merit further examination.

A few students mentioned that they would be ‘exhausted’ from talking with their relational partner, whether that be from arguments, keeping up with their partner while they have other areas of life to tend to, talking late at night, or something else. Kyle responded about one impact of his relationship on his exhaustion: “Constant late night phone calls to keep together made me lose a lot of sleep.” In this example, Kyle lost sleep from trying to stay up and communicate with his partner to strengthen his relationship, but it then took a toll on his health. In another response, Jessica speaks of her exhaustion due to her relationship:

“I would say the reason my long distance relationship was terminated was because the relationship was having a negative impact on my well-being. My partner towards the end of the relationship would leave me on delivered for weeks at a time and I was constantly feeling like I didn't matter. I didn't want to get out of bed, go to work, and go to class.”

Further, I found a negative impact on participants’ moods at times. Haley: “It was bad, I would wait for a text or call all day and find myself in distress when he wouldn't make time for

me.” Many other students said that it was tough to not be able to see their partner and that affected their mood negatively. Matt said he was almost always in a grumpy mood because of his relationship, and Thomas had a similar experience.

Another interesting finding is that while many participants said that their relationship helped them to de-stress because of the support system (see Enhancing section), others said that their relationship added to stress levels. Joe said that his relationship definitely stressed him out a little bit. Nathan also said that his LDR added an “extra layer of stress” to his life. Similarly, Rachel responded, “I was more stressed about my relationship, so my overall stress levels were a bit higher.” These are just a few examples that mentioned stress levels, but they are enough to show a commonality between participants articulating stress due to their relationship in college.

Finally, I found loneliness to detract from well-being, and there was a presence of loneliness in the participants’ responses. For example, a quote from Theresa states: “...the loneliness of being in a long distance relationship can be taxing.” Kyle also said that he got lonely sometimes because his relational partner lived so far away.

Discussion

This study was framed in a way that accounted for different tensions experienced by college students through their LDRs while recognizing that these experiences can be positive and negative. Overall, I found that both RDT and the Dark Side perspective were helpful when examining this population and provided insight that may not have otherwise prevailed. I will also note a few key takeaways from researching this population and opportunity for advancement of this research.

Using Relational Dialectics Theory, I was able to recognize tensions experienced by students in LDRs, a few of which were consistent with the theory’s “Big 3” Tensions (Guerrero,

Andersen, & Afifi, 2014). RDT was valuable in informing this study because it helped us to understand the tensions and complex feelings or emotions that this population was feeling. This study corroborated the RDT by showing yet another example where the theory is applicable. Another perspective may have glossed over these things and not brought to the foreground these tensions that are, in fact, experienced by students in LDRs. Along with that, we were able to identify new tensions that may help inform and advance the study of this particular population (FOMO, balancing time).

The Dark Side perspective was also immensely helpful in viewing this population. From this perspective, I was able to understand the tensions for what they were—positive, negative, both, and neither. One of the key takeaways of this study is that college LDRs can and are experienced positively and negatively; we cannot assume that relationships are one or the other. For example, we recognized loneliness in this study, which is an example of a silver cloud with a dark lining—the relationship can be seen as a silver cloud (something bright) but has a dark lining in that not being able to spend time together often can lead to feelings of loneliness among these participants. The Dark Side perspective enabled me to recognize that both negative and positive experiences are felt within these relationships. Thus, a more complete picture of relationships that do not tend to see relationships in one way or another is quite valuable in studying relationships. This was further proven by this study.

Further, I found it significant that RDT and Dark Side complemented each other well. The act of negotiating tensions, as well as the tensions themselves, are both positive and negative. These two theories not only do not conflict with one another, but also provide insight to one another when used in conjunction. For example, a significant finding in this study was that

participants selected certain sides of a tension, which then led to positive and negative experiences simultaneously.

To dive more deeply, I noticed a significant pattern emerging through RDT: for the students that responded that they put their partner first in negotiating the tensions (selection of connection), it was often the case that they also indicated a level of jealousy, stress, guilt, and/or FOMO. For example, Chloe said that she prioritized her partner first “instead of friends because I would rather have a good thing instead of a good time.” In spite of this response, Chloe indicated in other answers that there was a high degree of jealousy in her relationship and that she would stay in her dorm room often because of her partner’s jealousy; Chloe also said that when she would “go out”, she had to make sure she was texting her partner so that “he would know I am okay and not cheating on him or doing something he wouldn’t be happy with me doing.” In prioritizing their partner, the same students often indicated that they were “missing out” in other areas of their life, especially socializing with peers and keeping up with schoolwork. This is important in that it seemed that students who chose selection of one side of the dialectic had a more negative experience in their relationship than did students that chose segmentation as a negotiation. I would suggest further research to be done to validate these findings as significant or not.

Something else worth noting is that it seemed as if one’s LDR consistently detracted from students’ social circles and friends at the school they are attending. While this data does not provide a direct correlation here, many participants mentioned their relationship taking away time or energy from their friends at school, or even completely barring them from making friends at all. This is not something that should be taken lightly. Given the importance of support

networks on well-being (Berkman, 1984), especially in difficult times, I want to suggest that the impact of LDRs detracting from those support networks could be large.

However, on a more positive note, I did not find LDRs to be lesser relationships than those, say, in GCRs (geographically close relationships). The levels of support coming from relational partners seemed to be higher than typical populations, as found in the literature review, and it was apparent that a lot of students felt personal growth through their adversity. This suggests that there are unique positive outcomes to LDRs. Communication competence also seemed to benefit from LDRs since those involved are limited to mainly verbal or written communication. Many students mentioned improvement in different communication outcomes—and for the better.

This study is valuable for people that are in LDRs in college for a few reasons. First, it is comforting to know that others are in the same position as you and have experienced the same tensions. Also, it is sometimes helpful to read responses from others who may be able to articulate and express emotions better than you are able to. This study can inform people that are in this position by understanding the experiences of others in relation to their own; it also may help those people to identify tension management strategies that do or do not work for them. Finally, it can inform students in college LDRs about how their relationship may affect their well-being and spark a sense of realization about their own position for well-being.

Limitations

Obviously, as with any study, there were limitations in this research. First, the participants were mostly white/caucasian in ethnicity, which could mean that there are other experiences for other ethnicities and races that I may not have accounted for. It was also heteronormative in participants and experiences. In the future, research should be done concerning these phenomena with all types of relationships, not only heterosexual.

I also did not include a question asking how long the participants had been in a relationship or how long their relationship had been long distance, so it was likely that there were a range of times that participants had been in these relationships.

We also were not able to meet with participants in person due to the pandemic, so I did not get to fully understand what participants meant and how they were feeling. Administering the survey online meant that participants were able to not answer questions or submit them while incomplete, which likely would not have been the case in person. This also inhibited our ability to ask follow up questions.

Future Directions

Now that the limitations have been brought to light, I want to show opportunity for future directions branching from this research. I have realized that there are a lot more topics that I would like to know about and do future research on because of the limitations of this study, and I want to outline a few of those here.

One major takeaway from this study is that even though these students are all in similar situations with their relationships, their experiences are quite different from each other. This means that these students will need different types of social support. We cannot assume that these populations are monolithic, nor can we assume that all relational experiences are positive.

Additionally, as mentioned during the discussion about the importance of social support networks, these findings may be of interest to those researching student success on campus. In early drafts of this study, I considered measuring the impact of LDRs on social support networks and how that affected student success in their first year on campus. This study, used in conjunction with other research, could be helpful to understand another aspect of student success, and how certain factors such as relationships may affect learning outcomes.

Future studies could also continue to contribute to RDT in further researching or advancing my finding that segmentation could be a better tension management strategy than selection. Given that this study found better communicated outcomes with well-being when segmentation was the management strategy as compared with selection, I believe that future research could help to either advance this notion or challenge it.

Another area that I have not been able to pinpoint much research on, if at all, is the impact of not only the relationship itself, but also the relationship of increased social media usage and an individual's social life. Experience leads me to believe that there is a negative impact on a person's social life due to accommodations in their LDR, whether that be increased travel time or increased use of social media for communication with their partner. It would be useful to know the impacts of these things to fully understand the different areas one in an LDR must navigate that those in GCRs may not have to.

Finally, I would like to know: how do people in LDRs experience and navigate RDT differently than those in GCRs? It would be interesting to see how different types of relationships potentially experience the positive and the negative differently than one another. In this study, I qualitatively assessed how college students in LDRs manage the tensions experienced in LDRs, however, we do not know from this data if or how those in GCRs experience these tensions differently from this sample. Further research in this area would help to advance research in the fields of communication, relationships, and health.

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